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RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 1884
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 1827
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 1951
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0530
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1228
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 1585
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 2007
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI 4438
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SIPDIS

AF/S FOR S.HILL
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU
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NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR B.PITTMAN
TREASURY FOR J.RALYEA AND T.RAND
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR L.DOBBS AND E.LOKEN
COMMERCE FOR BECKY ERKUL
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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE ELECTORAL COMMISSION AVOIDS TOUGH QUESTIONS

SUMMARY

11. (U) The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) on March 18 gave a three-hour briefing to stakeholders on the mechanics of the election process. The commission, however, left unanswered key questions on the role of the police, bias in the media, and presence of police in polling stations. END SUMMARY.

ZEC Shows Signs of Bias

12. (SBU) The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) dodged many of the important questions concerning Zimbabwe's harmonized 29 March elections in a three-hour public briefing held on 18 March. Addressing an apparent contradiction in the Electoral Act, the ZEC declined to give an opinion on whether the law required a runoff if no candidate received more than 50 percent of the vote. The ZEC also did not address concerns about President Mugabe's amendment this week to the Electoral Act permitting the presence of police officers in polling stations. Finally, the ZEC refused to answer questions about statements of the head of the Defense Force and the Prison Chief that they would not serve under anyone but President Mugabe.

13. (SBU) Although ZEC's presidentially-appointed chairman tried to maintain an appearance of impartiality throughout the briefing, he repeatedly questioned the affiliation of a MDC-Tsvangarai audience member and occasionally stated he did not understand the concerns of audience members about the role of the police and the ability of political party agents and observers to adequately monitor election procedures. The ZEC chairman stated that the commission had to balance the interests of political parties in seeking to play an

oversight role with the commission's interest in a smooth election process. The commission also dismissed concerns about the objectivity of news media coverage of the election and access of the opposition to the media.

Election Mechanics

¶4. (U) The ZEC stated the ballot papers will be white for the presidential election, green for the senatorial election, blue for the House of Assembly and yellow for the local government election with a correspondingly colored ballot box for each election. The ZEC chairman emphasized that voters had to cast their ballots in their wards and "nowhere else". Per the SADC guidelines, voting would be held on one day, March 29, from 7 am to 7 pm. Everyone who was in line by 7 pm would be able to vote, assuming they were eligible. There are now 5.9 million registered voters; 300,000 additional voters were added to the rolls during the two-week voter registration period in February.

¶5. (U) The ZEC said it had identified 8998 polling stations, and confirmed press reports there will be composite polling stations (multiple voting stations within the polling station) in urban areas to accommodate the larger numbers of voters per polling station, but refused to give any details about them. The ZEC deferred to the Chief Elections Officer to formally clarify the locations and logistics of the composite polling stations at a later date. The ZEC has plans to deploy 90,000 polling officers and still has to recruit and train them. The polling officers will be recruited from government ministries and departments, parastatals, local authorities, and health services officials.

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¶6. (U) The votes for the presidential election from each ward will be transmitted to a constituency tabulation center, then to the provincial tabulation center, and finally to the national command center where the winner will be announced. The ZEC said there would be no observers or representatives from political parties at the national command center because no voting or vote counting would take place there.

The role of the security services

¶7. (SBU) According to the ZEC, the Zimbabwe Defense Force (ZDF), the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), and the Air Force are among a number of government ministries and parastatals who will assist with election logistics, although how they will assist was not discussed. According to the ZEC, only the ZRP submitted a nominal roll for postal balloting. However, other applications for a postal ballot could still be coming through the mail. The ZEC confirmed that postal ballot voting can be monitored by the political parties. The postal ballot boxes will be declared empty and sealed at the ZEC head office. (NOTE: There are up to 200,000 people, including military, police, diplomats overseas and individuals involved in administering and monitoring the elections, who are eligible to use a postal ballot; thus, it is likely that the number of postal ballots will rise before the election.)

Will the Election Turn Violent?

¶8. (U) Indicating the level of concern about post-election violence in Zimbabwe, one of the first questions asked was how the ZEC was preparing voters to avoid Kenyan-style violence. The ZEC discounted the potential for Kenyan style post-election violence, saying that Zimbabweans did not have the same composition of ethnic groups as Kenya and that Zimbabweans were "mature"

Comment

19. (SBU) The ZEC is generally considered a tool of the government and its responses at the briefing did little to inspire confidence in its ability to fairly oversee the election. With a compromised ZEC, the role of observers, particularly ZESN, becomes even more important. We are particularly concerned that, although there will be observers at the polling stations where counting occurs, observers will apparently not be present at tabulation centers and the national command center in Harare which will announce presidential results.

MCCEE